

CONFLICTS OF THE ARTIST IN MASS SOCIETY

Degradation has been associated with earning a livelihood in the arts since at least Plato, who showed disdain for the sophists who taught rhetorics for money. Aristotle with his concept *energeia*—which he designated as all activities that do not pursue an end but exhaust their full meanings in the performance itself—infused into western tradition the idea that only what we do for its own sake is noble. The lucre-versus-glory conflict pervades all writings on art from Leonardo and Vasari to the 19th century idea of the “pot au feu” and “making concessions” to the public. Only to paint for glory and immortality is noble, to submit to the whims of a patron is treason to art itself. These attitudes are rejected by many contemporary artists as anachronistic and sentimental snobbishness. Many artists, on the other hand, consider them viable. For them, living up to these ideals and subsisting at the same time is a dilemma. Patronage has virtually disappeared and the public purchases paintings from the well-established artists. Many resolve their dilemma by entering commercial or, as many prefer to call it, advertising art because there is a large and increasing demand for their

skills. These circumstances, together with the historical sentiments referred to, led me to ask the following questions: What social-psychological conflicts do artists experience when they enter advertising art? What changes do they undergo in their identity as they mature as commercial or advertising artists? And what are the implications of working in advertising art for the artist, his art and for the mass society of which he and his work are a part? These questions formed the basis of an empirical study of 53 commercial artists who were living in Chicago. Part of that study is described in this paper.

I. ANTINOMIES BETWEEN ADVERTISING AND ART

There are few institutions whose basic values are more opposed to one another in all fundamental respects than are those of art and advertising—their vocabularies, their traditions, their standards and rules, beliefs and symbols, criteria for the selection of subject-matter and problems, modes of presentation, canons for the assessment of excellence¹—are all antithetical.

The traditions of the artist seem by their very nature to entail a measure of tension with the traditions of advertising and its close allies, commerce and industry. The very intensity and concentration of commitment to these values reflect the distance which separates these two value orientations. Art, like genuine religion, continues to be vitally concerned with the sacred or the ultimate ground of thought and experience and the aspiration to enter into intimate contact with it. In art, this complex involves the search for truth, for the principles embedded in events and actions or for the establishment of a relationship between the self and the essential, whether the relationship be cognitive, appreciative or expressive.²

With this striving for contact with the ultimately important comes the self-esteem which always accompanies the performance

¹ Edward Shils, "The Traditions of Intellectuals," in *The Intellectuals*, George B. de Huszar, ed., Glencoe, Ill., The Free Press, 1960, p. 55. In this article, Shils discusses the tension between the traditions of the intellectual class and those of the business class. He is more general in his discussion of this conflict than I am in my discussion of the artist and advertising.

² *Ibid.*, p. 56.

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of important activities. Any effort to understand the traditions of the artists and their relations with the advertisers who control the world of commercial art must be based upon the realization of the crucial significance of the self-regard which comes from preoccupation and contact with the most vital facts of human and cosmic existence and the implied attitude of derogation towards those who act in more mundane or more routine capacities.³

In specific terms this entails such opposing tendencies in advertising as the selection of the mundane as subject matter; its presentation in terms of immediate perception as well as by the use of standardization, classification and clichés; the absence of individuality,⁴ of perplexity and complexity; the necessity for certainty of cognition and direction; the deliberate attempts to manipulate through the use of visual stimuli based upon emulation, fear and sex; and the assessment of excellence in terms of attention value, consumption and fidelity ("brand loyalty") to the product of one's sponsor.

In addition, there are innumerable technical differences based upon the problems of graphic reproduction. The commercial artist must consider the different qualities of papers and printing inks and the effect these will have on the final version of his work. He must consider that the painting as seen in the original and then on the printed page will be different because the flat surface of the paper eliminates the third dimension together with the brush strokes and canvas pores.

Since it is necessary to make the product and accompanying message stand out (known technically as high-lighting), a sharp linear style is used because a firm principle of advertising art is recognition through a silhouette.

Compositional differences can be seen in many automobile ads. In automobile ads, there appears to be an illusion of deep space but upon careful analysis it can be seen that the eye does not move from the front plane to deep space as in a painting by a Dutch master where the eye moves into the interior from

³ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

⁴ Paul Parker, "The Iconography of Advertising Art," *Harper's*, June, 1938, p. 80.

the front of the room then through an open door or window. The car covers the horizon, extends along most of the width of the composition and blocks the eye from easy recession into the background. Even the space in the background is indeterminate and has the function of forcing the nearer objects toward the eye which in turn forces the viewer to concentrate on the advertised product.⁵

II. THE METAMORPHOSIS OF THE FINE ARTIST

In view of these radically different conceptions of man and the contrary attributes of fine arts and commercial art, the question arises, "How does the artist overcome these difficulties and accept his new value system?" I wish to be particularly attentive to such problems as the acceptance of restrictions and the confinement of the imagination.

Apprenticeship—Most artists are not plunged into creating commercial art immediately. They pass through a long apprenticeship (which at times takes as long as 8 years) which reduces the trauma of entering an occupation which varies radically with previously held values. The apprenticeship functions in this manner for several reasons: the character of the work, the interaction between apprentices and professional artists, the ideology of commercial artists, and the separation of the artist from direct contact with the public who are influenced by his advertisements.

The first duties of the apprentice⁶ are trivial, his duties consist in running errands for the artists who employ him. Later, during the apprenticeship, he may be asked to help the artists with reference work, such as the details of the armor worn by a

⁵ Contrast this with many fine arts paintings such as a typical high renaissance picture like Raphael's *School of Athens*. For more technical differences, see Paul Parker, *The Analysis of the Style of Advertising Art*. Chicago, Dec., 1937, pp. 119-122. Unpublished masters dissertation, The Univ. of Chicago, Department of Art.

⁶ I use this term to distinguish the professional commercial artist from the neophyte.

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medieval knight. These demands are so limited and trivial—physically, morally, and intellectually—that the apprentice has the time and energy, in addition to a small amount of money from his work, to continue to paint. (Paradoxically these are precisely the advantages which he will not have when he becomes a professional commercial artist.) As a consequence, his identity does not suffer and he is able to conceive of himself as a fine artist.

Exposure to Professional Colleagues—The first genuine disturbance to his identity takes place in his interaction with the professional artists, usually after he has left “street work” and has moved inside the studio.

It is at this point in his career that he begins to be conditioned to the professional ideology which becomes part of his conceptual framework. This ideology makes possible the rationalizations and justifications for the distortions perpetuated in commercial art, as well as serving as a palliative for their psychic disturbances.

It is at this point in his career that he is conditioned to the things that he must do. He is first of all convinced of the harmless effectiveness of what he is doing. To take but one example, the apprentice is told that exaggerations of truth and visual data are necessary evils, and are “part of the game.” “The public expects it,” i.e. the public is not being harmed. Nor by implication is the artist immoral, since immorality follows only when the public is unaware of what is taking place.

In the second place, all seriousness is removed from what he is doing. Joking, for example, is pervasive while creating commercial art. Joking, because it reduces the seriousness of the exaggerations, reduces in the mind of the apprentice the harm his ads might cause to his moral self and the consumer.

Thirdly, there is a de-emphasis on the possible moral implications which his actions might entail since rationalizations and joking allow the apprentice to come to terms with his moral conscience, since it appears that the work he is doing is in conformity with the values of society. Consequently, the exaggerations and, in some cases, the deceptions perpetrated are not felt to be harmful.

There are a number of other subtle devices which reduce the psychic conflicts. A very important one is the depersonalized character of the advertisement. While the advertisement, when completed, is a human document in the sense that it is created by the artist, may bear his signature, will be seen by large numbers of people and will be a reflection of his abilities and have a bearing on his reputation, it is only personal in a limited and temporary sense within his occupational milieu.

Depersonalization in the sense meant here is related to the influence that the advertisement has on the lives of the persons subjected to it. The artist is remote from those who are influenced by his work. He perceives none of the manifold emotions stimulated by the advertisements he creates. Equity, consequently, does not assert its claim as readily as it might were the artist in direct contact with those who are influenced by his ads, as in the normal case where one is dealing with one's necessitous neighbors who live in the same plane. Consequently, the artist can proceed with his work undisturbed and uncontrolled by sentimental considerations of human kindness, honesty, or moral rectitude.⁷

The apprenticeship system also eases the psychic strain in other ways, since the involvement of the artist in producing *bona fide* commercial art is gradual. After his errand-boy stage, the artist-apprentice graduates from "street work" to inside work, i.e., he works inside the art studio. Having moved inside, the apprentice is still confined to menial tasks such as making certain that sufficient painting supplies are at hand.

Eventually he may be given some art work, but it is essentially the mechanical aspects of an illustration such as border and design work which are peripheral to the main illustration.⁸ Once again it should be noted that this type of work is not

⁷ Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of Business Enterprise*. New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1904, p. 53. There have been many philosophical treatments of the effects of depersonalization; see e.g. Gabriel Marcel, *Les hommes contre l'humain*, Paris, Ed. de la Colombe, 1951, English transl.: *Man against Mass Society*. Chicago, Henry Regnery Co., 1962.

⁸ This is very similar to the master—apprentice relationship of the past. See W. Martin, "The Life of a Dutch Artist in the 17th Century," *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. VII, Part II, p. 126.

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conducive to generating despair, guilt, or anxiety; nor is it conducive to the suppression of the imagination or freedom or the distortion of truth. As a matter of fact, some of the work is interesting despite the fact that the illustrations may be aesthetically, intellectually, and morally reprehensible. For example, it is revealing to witness the ingenuity of the artist as he transforms the written words, given him on an "order sheet" by the art director, into visual messages. It is informative to witness the mechanical means of reproduction, especially the four-color process where, by the use of the primary colors and angularity, any color can be printed. It may also be helpful for the artist who is interested in print-making and lithography. (There is also the possibility that he will be able to talk directly to some of the printers and engravers and learn from them the methods by which he can solve some problems which have appeared in either his fine arts or his commercial art work.)

Professionalization—As artists pass through the various stages of their apprenticeship and eventually become professional commercial artists, they develop various roles, occupational philosophies, and identities consistent with their emerging roles. These vary widely and can be thought of as lying along a continuum ranging from those who remain symbolically identified with the role of the fine artist to those who reject it completely. Between these two extremes lies a third group which identifies with various aspects of both roles. I have labeled these respectively the traditional-, the commercial- and the compromise-roles. In this paper I wish to call attention primarily to the group I have called the traditional-role artists.⁹

The philosophies by which the traditional-role artists are united and sustained are the romantic and bohemian ideologies of the 19th and early 20th century European artist, and it is because of their adherence to these ideologies that this group of artists experience the most guilt while they are working in

⁹ For a fuller description of these other roles see: Mason Griff, "The Commercial Artist: A Study in Changing and Consistent Identities," in *Identity and Anxiety*, Stein, Vidich & White (eds.), Glencoe, Ill., The Free Press, 1960, pp. 219-241.

commercial art. The romantic and bohemian ideology which they symbolically accept has no affinity with their secular society and the secular institutions in which they work.

The romantic tradition values impulse and passion, the appreciation of the spontaneous manifestations of the essence of concrete individuality. Hence it values originality, i.e., the novel, that which is produced by the "genius" of the individual (or the folk), in contrast with the stereotyped and traditional actions of the philistine.¹⁰

The values and requirements of commercial art, on the other hand, are the antithesis of these. In this respect, an insightful (and perhaps self-indicating statement for the artist) response by one person was made who suggested that, "You can almost feel the client guiding your hand as you draw!"

Traditional-role artists work as commercial artists but symbolically identify themselves as fine artists. In enacting this role, they withdraw symbolically from the role of the commercial artist and state that they are only temporarily engaged in commercial art as an expedient until they can accumulate enough money to be financially independent. This group feel that only if they are financially independent will they have the freedom and time necessary to paint.

The justification for traditional-role artists working in the field of commercial art is that the standards of contemporary society preclude any suitable alternative, since the art market is not large enough to support any but a small number of artists. Underlying this assumption is the belief that society will give lip service to, but will not support, their primary identity as fine artists who live only from and for their art.

To defend their premise they cite numerous examples, both past and present, of artists who have attempted but failed to live exclusively from the sale of their paintings, e.g., Van Gogh and Pizzaro. Coupled with this belief is the fact that many of this group have actually attempted to live in this way. Having found this to be impossible, they have turned to the commercial art field. Before doing this, some have worked in factories, in

¹⁰ Edward Shils, "Ideology and Civility," *The Sewanee Review* LXVI, Summer 1958.

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the post office, or in some other institutions having nothing to do with art; because they have felt that to do otherwise would channel much of their creative energy into these other artistic activities.

These are the artists who have left school with the intention of remaining dedicated to art but, through a number of discouraging experiences, have felt it was futile.

The alternative they have chosen is a difficult one, since the switch to commercial art means that they are accepting a role which they formerly had rejected. Their anxieties are furthered by the fact that they continue to paint as fine artists in their spare time (on week ends or on vacation), which means that they are constantly criticizing or at least dissenting from the standards and values which they are creating and sustaining as commercial artists.

Some of the general processes used to overcome these difficulties have been mentioned in connection with the apprenticeship. It is necessary at this point to describe how these problems are handled after the individual has become a professional commercial artist.

The first variation concerns the abandonment of their former role. One basic consideration in this connection is evident: the career of the artist is precarious and success¹¹ is uncertain. In recapitulating their achievements these artists can find no confirmation of their abilities from others such as normally functions to indicate progress nor can they with any certainty feel that diligence or ability will reap even minimal rewards.¹² This is reflected in the statements that they make in explaining how they arrived at the decision to abandon their former roles: "I always sold a few but never enough to keep me going;" "I sell a little but I don't know whether or not my level of painting is improving;" "You say to yourself, 'what will I be like when I'm fifty?';" "Painting drives you to a certain madness."

These statements not only reflect uncertainty and the absence

¹¹ I use this term broadly.

¹² For an elaborate treatment of this theme see Geraldine Pelles, *Art, Artists and Society: Origins of a Modern Dilemma*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, Prentice-Hall, 1963.

of confirmation by significant others; they indicate that the painter does not have the usual marks indicative of progress such as promotions, raises in pay, and awards to rely upon, which are institutionally structured in most occupations. These are the usual indices which mark social time, i.e., time in the sense which all groups and societies develop and use to measure the individual's movement toward the goals of their society.

This is valid for the artist despite the notion that painting is its own reward and that the artist, like Kant's free man, is an autonomous person who can disregard public recognition and confirming statements by others. Artists cannot entirely escape their contemporaries who place extraordinary emphasis on mobility and objectively useful activity and who judge the worth of their fellow men by the advances they have made in their career. The history of art is replete with examples of great masters who have disregarded the comments of others and who have made their work an end in itself. Nevertheless, and in spite of everything that can be said to the contrary, one cannot dismiss the difficulty of engaging in work where some form of encouragement is absent, nor, for that matter, can one overlook the mortifying effects of anonymity.

A number of persons have noted that self-evaluation, to a large extent, is reflected by the reactions and feelings of others and the social network of which an individual is an element. The persons who are responsible for these feelings are the members of society to which "historically, morally, economically, and perhaps ethnically, I feel that I belong. The individual is not something one can detach from others."¹³

Involved in this is a certain incongruity. The artist as a member of society incorporates a future goal orientation during childhood which becomes a part of his conceptual framework. On the other hand the goals of art are nebulous. The ones that do exist are precarious and virtually unattainable.

After all, how many artists have created an immortal painting or succeeded in communicating through their paintings

¹³ Isaiah Berlin, *Two Concepts of Liberty*. London, Oxford University Press, 1958, pp. 39-41. (The ultimate contrary possibility is the complete subjugation of the self to others, the frequent theme of many contemporary social critics.)

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the ideas they wished to express. There are a few markers, such as one-man exhibits, or acceptance by a gallery. Nevertheless, these achievements are tenuous, since fame is capricious and often follows fads. The totality of the career of an artist has so little social, psychological, and economical remuneration—and recognition is achieved only after a long and often painful struggle—that artists cannot compensate for the great insecurity which their career demands. Too many great artists have failed to receive recognition in their lifetime for this fact to remain unnoticed by contemporary artists.

The possibility of being discovered and recognized posthumously turns out to be of small comfort, especially when the artist and the people with whom he interacts and from whom he seeks confirmation are under the influence of a society oriented toward this world and toward remunerative occupations and the rewards and recognition which occupations provide. The precarious future of the fine artist clashes with the institutional challenges of their culture which demand that priority be given to immediate circumstances, such as one's wife and children and the questions stemming from responsibilities to them.

How just is it to ask them to sacrifice the comforts of life that the artist may pursue a goal so uncertain of attainment? Very often the artist has misgivings about his own abilities and few are self-confident to suggest that they possess the gifts of a Cézanne or a Rembrandt.

The Reaction to Conflict—Since the traditional-role artists identify themselves as fine artists temporarily engaged in commercial art, they admit that a role conflict exists, that they are aware of it, and that they have personally experienced it.

They verbalize this experience in terms of guilt and frustration, and they symbolize it in terms of (1) a time problem and (2) an ethical problem. The former concerns the fact that their jobs as commercial artists do not allow them sufficient time to paint. The latter concerns the concept of their talent as a "gift" and stems from the belief that the ability to paint is of divine origin and is a form of grace.

The logic of the problem is that if one's parents cannot

paint and if there is no evidence that painting ability is inherited, what then accounts for this ability? The answer most frequently given is that painting is a gift from the *Deity*. The argument follows that if the artist is an avatar endowed with a divine talent, he is obligated to use this gift for the greater glory of the *Deity* and man. Since, theoretically, religion and the secular world have, as Durkheim and many western scholars¹⁴ have noted, antithetical goals and rewards, then that talent is not to be dissipated.

The fact that the artist is not immersed in developing his gift is sinful, but it is blatant sacrilege when he profanes his gift by using it to sell things.

The idea of the divine origin of the artist's ability goes back at least to Plato and the Socratic Dialogues.¹⁵ With reference to painting, adumbrations of the same ideas were present in the 14th century and culminated in the late 15th and early 16th century with the belief in the divine origin of the painter's imagination, especially in such painters as Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci.¹⁶

It is also part of that mystery which surrounds any unaccountable afflatus such as that associated with *charisma* and the charismatic leader or, as in preliterate societies, to the shaman or the possessor of *mana*. In the conventional religious sense, it is based on the Judeo-Christian theology that men are a special category of God's creatures, having in them a breath of divinity or being capable of absorbing into themselves and of being absorbed into divinity.

In a cosmos which has progressively elevated science—the *sine qua non* of rationality—to the detriment of irrationality, there remains in the painter and other artists the mysteriousness

¹⁴ This separation does not occur in many eastern religions and philosophies. See Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *The Religious Basis of the Forms of Indian Society*. New York, Orientalia, 1946, pp. 14, 20, *passim*.

¹⁵ *Plato Selections*, edited by Raphael Demos. New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955, *Ion*, pp. 234-251.

¹⁶ Walter John Tomasini, *The Social and Economic Position of the Florentine Artist in the 15th Century*. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation. The University of Michigan, 1953. Also see Jean Paul Richter, *The Literary Works of Leonardo da Vinci*. Oxford Press, 1939.

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of creative talent. These extraordinary abilities have remained unexplainable despite all attempts to the contrary; and they, like the physical concepts of indeterminacy, the divergent and contradictory theories of light, heat and matter, creation, infinite past and future, and concepts such as a boundless universe, have remained to annoy and tantalize man's curiosity, his desire for certainty, and the continual search for logical and rational explanations of his experiential world.¹⁷

I have described one social-psychological method—that of withdrawal from the role of the commercial artist which is implemented by the artist to resolve his conflict. A second method is that of compartmentalization. By the use of this psychological method they are able to cope with the serious charge leveled against them by fine artists, art educators, dealers, and gallery owners who maintain that commercial art carries over to fine arts.

Their argument holds that the two arts are fundamentally different and that any carry-over from commercial art is pernicious. Their contention is that if artists continually create commercial art, their perception and mental faculties will unavoidably, irreversibly and unconsciously be regimented to seeing and thinking within the framework of commercial art.

Underlying this belief is the idea of an unconscious carry-over of the techniques of commercial art such as the slickness, the immediate recognition, and the difficulty of eradicating the formulas used in commercial art after one has painted in this way for many days or years. A second dimension of this is related to what I shall refer to as the "blank canvas."¹⁸

There are two problems to distinguish in connection with the problem of the "blank canvas" or "blank page":

- (1) The exhaustion of ingenuity, and
- (2) The difficulty of returning to one's work after an absence from painting.

The first, the exhaustion of ingenuity, is a common experience. It refers to the dissipation of creative vitality; it refers to

¹⁷ Joseph W. Krutch, *The Measure of Man*, Chap. 7, "How Probable is Probability," New York, Grosset & Dunlap, 1953, p. 147-158.

¹⁸ Czeslaw Milosz, *The Captive Mind*. New York, Vintage Books, Inc., 1955, p. 164. Milosz refers, in a similar vein, to the fear of poets finding themselves alone before a sheet of blank paper.

a bursting, inspiring, self-sustaining energy in its initial form.

The even flow and logic of ideas, the continual germination of new ideas and their interconnections with previous, present, and future ones are easily perceived. Each concluding thought leads to a new chain of interconnections. Consequently thought and discovery form a constant relationship with one another, and the periods of cognitive immobility are momentary.

The termination, the attrition and the failure to regenerate this mood has been the complaint of innumerable artists, Wordsworth and Coleridge being two notable examples. It is this experience and the subsequent period of drudgery that I refer to as the "fear of the blank canvas."

The problem of an artist returning to his canvas after his initial period of inspiration is a universal experience. This problem is compounded when the artist returns to his canvas after having left it for many months. How does the artist pick up the threads of thought and artistic development which he may have had several days or months ago? When one returns to a painting (or a story, a poem, a scholarly article, a musical composition), it is the same as starting from the beginning. Confrontation with this problem, the reality of the inactivity of sitting before a canvas not knowing where (and at times fearing) to begin, the awareness that time is passing (time is money in commercial art) are all thoughts and conditions that bear down upon the artist. It is understandable why so frequently the artist is tempted to regress to those familiar idioms and formulas that he has been using in commercial art.

Another consideration is the fear of experimentation that often results in wasted effort, but which is necessary to begin painting and which eventually leads to themes of genuine creative expression. For example, while experimenting with an abstract line drawing, the artist might be curious to see how a new series of lines would appear on a canvas. He may be curious to know how lines would appear if they intersected at a 45 degree angle rather than at a 30 degree angle or how one color might blend more effectively than one used on the previous painting.

Continuous painting permits the retention of these thoughts. If, however, one can only return to one's artistic work spo-

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radically, these ideas are either lost or partially remembered. Only a fortuitous chance can bring back their substance.

Also lost due to the interference of intervening work is the sustained preoccupation with ideas which accompany the concentration on one's art. For example, thinking about one's work in the evening while in bed or in relaxed periods after meals. Frequently it is during these moments that ideas are generated leading to solutions or suggested solutions to problems. These possibilities are lost or interfered with by commercial art, which demands equal concentration on problems of its own.

Taken collectively, these are a few of the factors which have been suggested by my respondents as being instrumental for artists' falling back on the familiar rather than exposing themselves to the blank canvas and the accompanying fears and frustrations.

Let me point out that the group I have classified and described here as traditional-role artists makes up but a small segment of my study, 12 out of 53. Many of the artists interviewed fall into the classification I have called the compromise-role artist, i.e., those who attempt to fuse both roles and reflect to a great extent the Bauhaus definition of the role of the artist. The remainder fall into the classification called the commercial-role artist who view the traditional role as a 19th century anachronism and the compromise role as exaggerated. They feel that they are simply craftsmen with certain skills which are available to a paying client.